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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003723

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SUBJECT: KARBALA'S TRIBES AND THE SUPPORT COUNCILS

REF: A. A) BAGHDAD 2124

1B. B) BAGHDAD 2967

1C. C) BAGHDAD 3033

1D. D) BAGHDAD 3324

1E. E) BAGHDAD 3639

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

11. (C) Summary: Karbala's tribes are an enduring source of order and security. They participate in the tribal Support Councils initiated by Prime Minister Maliki, but should be viewed as "rented" rather than "owned" by the Da'wa Party. Tribal backing, key to candidates' success in the provincial elections, likely will play in Da'wa's favor. End Summary.

Here to Stay

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12. (SBU) Karbala's tribes have played a critical stabilizing role since before the existence of Iraq or even of Islam. In a region that has seen empires and governments come and go, the tribes are an enduring source of order and security. They are valued by members because they impart social status, provide protection, resolve disputes, redistribute wealth, care for the sick and the destitute, and reinforce social bonds through marriages and other rituals. Tribal loyalty -- both up and down the "chain of command" -- is a venerable binding force.

13. (SBU) Most of Karbala's tribes belong to one of four great confederations: The Bani Asad (prevalent in Karbala City and al-Hindiyah Qadah), the Bani Hasan (al-Hindiyah), the Al Masoud (al-Husayniyah Qadah), and the Al Yasar (al-Hur Qadah). These confederations are overwhelmingly Shi'a, although a few tribes in each subscribe to Sunnism. Recognizing the tribes' influence, successive governments and other actors -- within as well as outside Iraq -- have sought to woo tribal leaders through promises and blandishments. Prime Minister Maliki's Support Councils (refs A and B) are the latest such endeavor.

Support Council Structure

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14. (SBU) There are 14 Support Councils in Karbala Province, apportioned by population: One in Ayn al-Tamr Qadah, two in al-Hur, three in Karbala City, and four each in al-Husayniyah and al-Hindiyah. Each has 25 members: One presiding officer -- invariably a senior shaykh -- and 24 other members divided among four committees (six members in each). The committees are Security, Reconciliation, Management, and Reconstruction. The presiding officers of the 14 Support Councils report to a coordinating office at the Karbala Government Center managed by Mohammad Abd al-Sahab. Al-Sahab, who is a functionary rather than an authority figure, in turn reports to the Implementation and Follow-Up Committee for National Reconciliation (IFCNR) within the Prime Minister's office in Baghdad.

¶ 5. (C) The Prime Minister's office funds the Support Councils. It provided each of the 14 in Karbala with 25 million Iraqi dinars (approximately \$21,000) to set up their operations. Every month, through al-Sahab, it gives each an additional ten million dinars (approximately \$8,500) to cover expenses. (Note: The monthly payments to each Support Council in Karbala, the only province with a Da'wa Governor, are high than those noted in most Support Councils in other parts of the country. End note.) According to the head of one of the Support Councils, the members meet monthly to divide this money among themselves. They conduct no other real business, and it is understood that this money is coming from Maliki/Da'wa in order to assure the tribes' support.

Rented, Not Owned

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¶ 6. (C) A tribal shaykh told PRT members on November 22 that Maliki's Support Council initiative arose because Da'wa feared ISCI was stealing a march on winning the tribes' Qfeared ISCI was stealing a march on winning the tribes' affections through its "Popular Support Councils," which included the heads of tribes as well as other influential societal figures. He observed that -- in a display of bet-hedging comparable to corporate donations in U.S. election campaigns -- some of his fellow shaykhs serve concurrently on both the Da'wa and ISCI councils. Moreover, he said, the heads of some of Karbala's tribes have traveled to Iran (see ref C for details on Iranian attempts to woo the tribes) and to Qatar and the UAE (the latter two reportedly at Saudi Arabia's expense) to be feted, fawned over and financed. Such apparent hypocrisy is enthusiastically

BAGHDAD 00003723 002 OF 002

supported by the members, he observed, because it means more money. However, no one should take tribal support for granted. The tribes may be "rented" but never "owned," he observed, and they invariably pursue their own interests, which may or may not coincide with those of the highest bidder.

¶ 7. (C) For now, the shaykh added, Da'wa can count on the tribes' support. This became evident during last month's failed ISCI-led attempt by some Provincial Council (PC) members to impeach Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khzali, a Da'wa stalwart and Maliki acolyte (ref D). One of the PC members' chief complaints was that the Support Councils, backed by Aqeel, were a "parallel legislative body" and thus were unconstitutional. As the pro-Support Council demonstration led by the tribes here earlier this month (ref E) illustrated, Da'wa has no difficulty calling on the tribes to do its bidding and thus is likely to witness overwhelming tribal support for its candidates in the provincial elections.

Comment

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¶ 8. (C) Political fortunes in Karbala change quickly. Should tribal leaders perceive Da'wa's interests diverging from their own, or that others have more to offer, they could abandon the party without warning. As January 31 draws nearer, however, Da'wa's relationship with Karbala's tribes appears to be setting the stage for an electoral triumph.

CROCKER